

Strangulation assaults in domestic violence cases

Strangulation is one of the most lethal forms of violence used by men against their female intimate partners. Strangulation is a form of asphyxia (lack of oxygen) in which blood vessels and air passages are closed as a result of *external* pressure on the neck.¹ Strangulation can induce the loss of consciousness within about 10 seconds and death within 4-5 minutes.² Strangulation is often incorrectly referred to as ‘choking’ which involves *internal* blocking of the trachea (windpipe) by a foreign object like food.¹ There are three forms of strangulation: hanging, manual (e.g. using one hand, two hands, forearm, kneeling on the victim) and ligature (e.g. using telephone wire, electrical cord, shoelace, piece of clothing).¹ Manual strangulation is the most common form of strangulation used in domestic violence cases.²

The act of strangulation symbolizes an abuser’s power and control over the victim. The victim is completely overwhelmed by the abuser; she vigorously struggles for air, and is at the mercy of the abuser for her life. Some have asserted that there can be few more frightening experiences than feeling short of breath without any recourse.³ A single traumatic experience of strangulation or the threat of it may instill so much fear that the victim can get trapped in a pattern of control by the abuser and made vulnerable to further abuse.

- Studies indicate that 23% to 68% of women victims of domestic violence have experienced at least one strangulation assault by a male partner during their lifetime;^{4,5} and 33% to 47.3% women report that their partner had tried to strangle them in the past year.^{6,7}
- Strangulation can be a recurring form of violence in abused women’s lives. In a study of 62 abused women who came to a shelter or a violence prevention center, 68% (n=42) had a history of strangulation, and on an average, each woman had been strangled 5.3 times in their intimate relationships.⁵
- Strangulation can have substantial physical (e.g., dizziness, nausea, sore throat, voice changes, throat and neck injuries, breathing problems, swallowing problems, ringing in the ears, vision change), neurological (e.g., eyelid droop, facial droop, left or right side weakness, loss of sensation, loss of memory, paralysis) and psychological (e.g., PTSD, depression, suicidal ideation, insomnia) health effects.^{1,2,5} And, higher the number of strangulation attempts experienced, higher the number of adverse health conditions experienced by victims.⁸
- As compared to other forms of physical violence, strangulation, often leaves no marks or any other external evidence on the skin.^{1,2} In a study of police records of 300 strangulation cases, victims did not have any visible injury in 50% of the cases and in 35% of the cases the injuries were too minor for the police to photograph.² The difficulty in detecting strangulation is a challenge for law enforcement and medical professionals, which helps make it a particularly useful means of intimidation and harm for an abuser.
- Strangulation is a significant risk factor for attempted or completed homicide of women by their male intimates. In a study of 57 women who were killed by a male partner during 1995-1996 in Chicago, 53% of the victims had experienced strangulation in the preceding year and 18% of the victims had been killed by strangulation.⁷ In another study of women victims it was found that 45% of the attempted homicide victims and 43% of the homicide victims had been strangled in the past year by their male partner, as compared to 10% of the victims who were abused but were neither a homicide or an attempted homicide victim.⁹
- Strangulation may indicate an ongoing pattern of severe violence in the lives of women victims. In a study of women who came to a Chicago hospital for any health related reason and had experienced domestic violence in the past year, 210 women were interviewed twice. And, of the 68 women whose partner had tried to strangle them in the year before the initial interview, 65% reported in the follow-up interview that they experienced a severe incident in the period after the initial interview (e.g. incident resulting in

permanent injury, internal injury, head injury, broken bones; threat or attack with a weapon; being completely “beaten up,” strangled or burned).⁷

- Strangulation might not be the only method of abuse during individual assaults. In a study of women victims who had experienced strangulation, 88% of them had also experienced other types of abuse (physical, verbal, sexual) in the same incident.⁵
- In a large proportion of strangulation assaults, children are present during the assault. In the earlier mentioned study of police records of 300 strangulation cases, children witnessed the strangulation assault in at least 41% of the cases. And, this number is likely an underestimate because the victim might be reluctant to report that a child was present or because the police might have failed to document the presence of children in some cases.²

References

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